

Name of person interviewed: Charlotte Enoksen

Facts about this person:

Age: 60 (born 1949)

Sex: female

Occupation: daughter of fisherman, ex-wife of fisherman

If a fisherman (if retired, list the ports used when fishing),

Home port:

Hail Ports:

Residence (Town where lives):

Ethnic Background: Norwegian

Interviewer: Madeleine Hall-Arbor

Transcriber: Laura C. Orleans

Place interview took place: Working Waterfront Festival

Date and time of interview: September 27, 2009

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MHA Ok so I will ask you to introduce yourself so it's on the mic and tell me where and when you were born.

CE You want year?

MHA Well you don't have to

CE I'd really rather not, I'm gonna date myself anyways. Um my name is Charlotte Enoksen and I was born in Acushnet, Mass and

MHA Sometime this century

CE Yeah, 1949

MHA So you come from a fishing family?

CE Yeah

MHA You want to elaborate on that

CE My father came to New Bedford in 1938 and at the, oh let me see now, at the invitation or behest of, I can't remember his first name, but Leif Jakobsen's father. My father had run into him on the boat when he was going back to Norway for a visit, my father had been in the country for awhile at that point.

MHA In New Bedford?

CE In New Bedford, no, he had been in the midwest. He came to, oh God, he came to America in I think 1928, 29 something like that and went to the midwest cause that's where his sponsor was and worked on the Great Lakes steamers for a number of years and went back for a visit and met Mr. Jacobsen who said, there's money to made in New Bedford and when my father returned he came here. And stayed here.

MHA So, were your, was your family in Norway in fishing?

CE Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. My family was from a different part of Norway than most of the Norwegians around here. We were from Lufuten which is way up north and the cod fisheries, the giant cod, they used to fish. So he grew up fishing.

MHA And so when he came here did he go continue in ground fishing or

CE He started groundfishing, later on he switched to scalloping. Yeah. He always considered himself a draggerman though. He said it was more interesting.

MHA Huh. Do you know why?

CE He said that there was more redundancy in the work on a scalloper, that there wasn't as much diversity with it, you know? They weren't splicing twine, they weren't fixing the nets, they weren't filleting different fish. He found it far more diverse on a dragger.

MHA So you think that he switched because of economic incentive?

CE Oh sure. That's why they all switch. For a long time they used to go back and forth. It would depend on what the fisheries were like. I'm sure you've heard that.

3:00

MHA How about, what, do you know what period of time it was when he switched from dragging to scalloping?

CE I was a kid.

MHA Yeah.

CE I was a kid. I remember being a kid and they started this, they were really doing a big marketing push on scallops and there was scallop festivals and the fishermen themselves would cook the scallops. I remember that, my father and some of his friends would be cookin' scallops and there used to be a lot of stories in the paper and they did that little film the Pearl, the first Pearl of the Sea. And my Uncle was in that. And uh, and then all of a sudden, I remember birthdays he used to always wish for the price of scallops to go up so I, I mostly remember him, you know being involved in the scallop industry.

MHA And uh, you have at least one brother in the industry.

CE Yeah my brother is still involved in the industry, deeply involved in the industry, yes.

MHA Do you have other siblings?

CE No that's it. That's it. We don't have anyone going out to sea anymore, which is a wonderful thing.

MHA Because?

CE Because it's a wonderful thing, it's a lot less fearful.

MHA Ok, so uh what was it like to be, to grow up in a fishing family with your father being a fisherman?

CE I think the way I grew up it was the norm because I was part of a very tight knit immigrant community and everybody else you know was, it was the same for everybody, you know we would...the men were gone to sea and we'd go to church, we'd go to church,

a lot. You know the church was almost all Norwegian and I remember on, when I was little, it was in Norwegian and the services were in Norwegian. We learned our little songs in Norwegian and it was a very tight ethnic group. So everybody's father was fishing. So it didn't seem odd to me, it was what was. I remember when I started kindergarten, I guess when I was around, when I got a little older and I started meeting other children and you know their fathers came home every night and I thought that was very strange. Their fathers came home every night and their parents didn't speak with accents and I thought was so strange. I couldn't understand it. It was really funny. Cause see reality is what you know. And that's your norm.

6:00

Then you know it, when you get older you start to be more cognizant of the risks of the dangers, you know. I couldn't understand why he would go back to, he would be in for fish and there'd be a storm and he'd go back to the boat when the storm started instead of being home with us. I couldn't grasp that and I think my mother had trouble with that too. And, you know now I understand it was to protect his business, but you know things like that were confusing, you know. He was never around. My brother was more of a father figure than my Dad when I was little because he wasn't around much. They were only in for 72 hours back when I was little and so my memories of spending time with my father when I was, alone with my father when I was a kid are very, very precious to me because they were so few and far between.

MHA So what was the pattern, how long would they stay out?

CE I don't know. You know I, what I have stuck in my head is 10 and 5, 10 and 5. That's, you know when I was married to a fisherman it was 10 and 5. That's what I remember it being, but it wasn't like that when I was real small. But that was the standard pretty much as long as I was involved. I haven't been involved in the industry for a long time.

MHA So was your mother also from fishing family?

CE Oh gosh yes. She was from the same island, both of them. So this was life, you know. It's what was. It was the only life they really knew. My mother I don't think really cared a whole lot for it. But it was what they knew and it provided a good living. And yeah, her family was involved in the, my grandfather had a fish buying business and they were involved in a lot of stuff like that. My mothers, one of my mother's brothers was lost at sea in Norway. And that was pretty devastating.

MHA So that must have made it more difficult when your father was out.

CE My father was already shore side when Spreerra (sp?) was lost. But my brother was still going out to sea. My uncle was still going out to sea. My mother had one brother who came here and he, you know, so we still had plenty of people going out there so she became far more fearful after that. It's a tough way to lose somebody 'cause there's no rite of passage, it's very hard to mark a day that you move forward.

9:00

MHA Now you were married to a fisherman as well?

CE Oh yeah. Yup. Yeah in spite of myself. I grew up saying I was not gonna marry a fisherman, I wouldn't date a fisherman. I wouldn't go, I wouldn't even date Norwegians. I was terrified of marrying a fisherman. It was absolutely not going to be my life and after I was married for a year, he decided he wanted to go fishing and I was not happy [laughs]. Not happy at all. We were living in Brockton at the time and so I told him that well if we were gonna, if that was what we were gonna do, I was gonna have to be in New Bedford, I would need to be near my family and have that support while he was out to sea. And so that's what we did. And uh...it's tough. It's a tough way. I can't imagine what it must be like for people who didn't grow up in it. I can't imagine that kind of adjustment. It's, it's uh, because you're living essentially for a major portion of your lives, you're living completely separate lives. I guess it's a little easier now with cell phones. But there were no cell phones back then. We had to depend on Bill Brennan and the Fish News for communication so, it was hard when there was a crisis. Real hard when there was a crisis.

MHA Either at sea or at home.

CE Yeah. You know. If there was a storm you were worried out of your mind. But if you had, my son was born with some problems, he was quite ill for quite some time and uh, it seemed like nothing ever happened till after the boat would go past Butler Flats Light. Nothing ever happened. There was never a crisis and I really think if you talk to most people from fishing families that's pretty much the norm that they had some sort of aura of protection from familial crisis. But I really think we were, the women were better equipped. I think there's a certain type of person that goes out to sea that requires that degree of separation. But I think if you're not a fiercely independent woman who is raised to be independent, it's a tough, tough way to go. Cause I was raised in it and I had a tough time with it. But later on I married an accountant and I couldn't handle that way of life. That's seemed totally weird to me.

12:00

You know it really did. He'd, on the weekend he'd go play golf and to me when the man was home from work he was supposed to be home. You know, so there were all these value conflicts and things like that because I was not, I was raised one way and I had lived so, ten years with this other way as a wife and a mother that I, I go ruined I guess [laughs], you know. Abnormal became normal and I accept that about my life and who I am.

MHA So do you have, you have the son, do you have any other children?

CE Yeah, I have a daughter. I have a daughter. I have four grandchildren, none of whom seem particularly interested in the waterfront. My daughter lives in Vermont. My son is a police officer in Fall River. So they're very land locked. But uh, you know maybe

somebody would take some interest. Maybe that's why I keep writing about it I don't know, kind of like well, this is where you come from. And some day you might seek that out.

MHA So you've talked a little bit about what it was like being a wife, how was it when the fishermen, either your father or your husband, when they came home. How did life change? How was it different?

CE Oh. It was completely different. Completely different. I think the, one of the really positive things about it is that when they come in you don't fuss about foolishness, you know. The time is precious. There's a lot of preparation, there's getting everything ready. There's a lot of excitement and a lot of energy. That's when things are going well. If you're not getting along it's a little different. But you know when things are good it's almost like a celebration. You know they come home and...I remember when he decided to go fishing, my father came over to the house and he opened the door, the door to the refrigerator and he asked where the beer was and I said, "I don't drink beer Dad." And he said, "Well Frank drinks beer. " And I said "yeah," and he said, "well you know, when he comes home, he might want a beer, so maybe you should have it here. Because you don't want him to stop at the National Club for a beer." I said "ok Dad." He went out and got beer for Frank so. And you know, he sat me down and he just was giving me the man's point of view of what they expect when they come home where their heads are at and that helped me a great deal.

15:00

I remember my mother saying "you do not talk him about anything important. The first day he's in or the day before he leaves. You have three days to deal with real life, but the other days he's transitioning" And that helped. You know. That helped me a lot, I mean I had good teachers. I had, that was what my family did. So I had teachers and I had a lot of support.

MHA What about the community itself? When you were growing up it was very tight knit, as you got older it developed. And your husband was not Norwegian, right

CE No. He was Irish.

MHA So how did he fit into that tight knit community when he was home?

CE He went to church with me of course. And that was not debatable. But, well because it was a family, I think the fishing families stick together as families, as family units. And that's what we did when he was in we were with the extended family. And sometimes with his extended family as well. Life revolves around the work. Life revolves around the trip. I think it's different now where they only have certain days where they can fish. I mean this was everything was random back then. Things like birthdays. Birthdays are arbitrary. You have a birthday party whatever day is closest to the birthday where all the men are home, which could be like a month later. Weddings are hard to plan. I remember when I got married there was a strike going on and we were, we were

so scared that the strike was gonna end before the wedding, just before the wedding and we were gonna have no men at the wedding. They were not gonna be there. No men on my side. And the strike broke on the, on our honeymoon so we didn't. But you think about things like that are bizarre. I would, you know they can kind of plan for a day off, but I even remember when my son was born, trying to plan for him to be home and it worked out for us. But a lot of times it doesn't work out for people you know. You just can't plan on them being present. And then sometimes you can't count on them being emotionally present because they're still involved emotionally with some event that occurred out to sea.

18:00

MHA Was your husband going out for scallops?

CE Yeah, yeah. He was, he fished on my brother's boats.

MHA And your brother owns a few boats right?

CE A few, just a few yeah. I can't really answer too much about my brother because...

MHA It's ok.

CE Just because

MHA Were focusing on you so that's ok. Let's see. I know that, well what do you do now?

CE What do I do now? I do social work. I am a resident service coordinator in elderly and disabled subsidized housing. And it's a major career shift and I'm having a good time with it. I really enjoy it, doing direct service. That's what I do and I write poetry as a, as a diversion, I guess that's the best way to put it.

MHA Actually we were asked to ask you if you wouldn't mind reciting a poem.

CE Oh you, oh really. I should have been prepared for that. Ok. I don't know what you want me to address. Ok. So I mean, because my poetry about the waterfront pretty much reflects all my different roles. You know, there were poems I wrote for Frank way back when. There are poems I write now that are more reflective. So I don't know what, which...give me a hint.

MHA I'd be interested in hearing something that you've written recently, just to sort of hear how you think about things now.

CE Ok let me just see what I have. I am a typical creative person. Everything is willy nilly. You know it's...Alright, this one I should know. Ok I know which one I wanna read. Ok this is one I wrote a couple of years ago. I don't tend to title my stuff.

I am not adrift
My roots flow in the waters of the Atlantic
Carried by the Gulf Stream from shore to distant shore.
The first of my line born to this place,
this harbor
Where time is measured in trips
and days at sea
This place where time stands still in a sailor's farewell
A family's worry
A child's lament
I am not adrift
My roots flow through a world without borders
Ruled by tide and current
Wind and wave.

21:08

CE Thank you

MHA So this is something that you have been doing for how long?

CE Oh, I started when Frank was fishing, well no. I wrote, when I was a kid I wrote poetry. I mean I've always written. It's what I do for, 'cause art is for therapy. I mean my training is in writing. I worked as a writer for, this is the first job I've had that didn't require any degree of writing. It's quite wonderful. [laughs] I don't have deadlines to deal with.

MHA So what is your work history. Where did you start. Were you working when Frank was...

CE Fishing? No, no. When I married him I was working in advertising. I was writing ad copy. And then I started oh god writing some stories for the Fall River Herald and then the Standard Times and then I was, when we split up I went back to ad copy for awhile, but childcare was too expensive. So I figured I would do better as a freelancer so that's what I did for a number of years. Then I worked in politics for awhile. Politics slash law enforcement doing public information. And I worked in grant writing. All these things kind of evolved. You know, you write and that leads you down a path and then that path leads you to another path. I ended up involved in program development, grant writing, things like that for the housing authority. And then went on my own for awhile as a grant writer and freelancing and then I decided I would try this which I have been doing for four or five years now.

MHA I mean to ask you something also about how you see yourself in New Bedford and how the fishing community has changed over time since you know you were talking about the close knit aspect of before, I suspect it's not as close knit as it was before.

CE Oh I don't think it is at all. It might be on the boats. You know on certain boats. But I think now like with the people I grew up with, we're shore side. You know. Not too many, not too many of the American born are fishing. They're involved in the industry. Then you have those of us who are like on the perimeter of the industry, you know with creative work.

24:00

But you know life changes. We move on and, I mean it's a typical immigrant kind of story. You know. You assimilate and you marry outside of your ethnic community and your children are half this and half that and they identify with the other side or whatever. You need to just kind of roll with it. And I see myself, quite frankly, I'm kind of, every year when I get involved with this, I'm somewhat bewildered by it because I feel so distant from it now. And, but yet it pushes me to keep in touch with my own roots. But, oh it's changed. It's changed tremendously. It's, I'm saddened, deeply, deeply saddened by some of the changes. I think about the days of my father and even when my brother was starting out, my uncle, these people that, you know they could go on deck and they could make their way, you know and buy a piece of the boat and then own the boat and, you know kind of like having that little piece of land and I don't know if that's gonna be possible for much longer and I grieve for that. But I grieve for that in so many aspects of America. It just took a little longer to get to the fishing industry.

MHA Actually I want, we want to leave you enough time to get to your narrative stage, but I can see more parallels just from the discussions yesterday with the farmers, that it's the same kind of things.

CE Oh yeah. Yeah you know, you get the government involvement you have the lack of the resource you know it's just greed. Horrible, horrible greed.

MHA What about, do you still consider New Bedford a fishing community?

CE I always will. I always will, yeah. To me, I wrote a poem about it too. To me the heart of this city beats in the waterfront. And it always has, and it always will. And if that's ignored I think that will bring about the death nelly for this city because it's, it's, I mean going back to the whaling and the textiles were dependent on the waterfront and then you know you have the commercial fisheries and I think the worse thing that could happen to New Bedford would be for it to become a recreational port.

27:00

MHA Do you see any threat of that?

CE I think it's always a possibility. Because when times are bad, people just reach out in desperation and grab at something. And it is an attractive port and I don't begrudge recreational people at all, I think it's wonderful, but I don't think a city this size can survive on tourism. This is, this is another thing that I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to see. I've seen changes that I never thought I would. And I wish I could say they're positive.

MHA Like what kinds of things?

CE I think mostly it's the, the demise of the fisheries as I knew them. The independence, it's turning more into something you know like a factory job that's on the water and that saddens me. I know it's necessary. But there's a lot about life that modern life that may be necessary, well it may seem necessary, maybe that's more accurate, to fit into the modern values and that. I have a hard time really talking about my feelings about the industry because of my brother. And I don't want anything I say to reflect negatively upon him. Yet some of my feelings may be in opposition. I hope I handled that tactfully.

MHA That was good.

CE [laughs]

MHA Do you think that the values that show up now in New Bedford are vastly different from, well you mentioned greed...

CE Greed is always an issue with everything. Well, see it's the same thing, that probably the farmers are going through, probably everybody's going through.

30:00

I think there's that, yeah that community is not there, that looking out for one another, that concern about the greater good, I don't see that happening. I see sides. I see divisions. You've got the skipper owner and you have the corporate guy and I don't know how they're going to co-exist because they don't seem to want to co-exist. I don't know if they can. But there's always, you know, that feeling of the greater good, that reaching out to one another when times are tough. I remember when my father, I remember my father talking about well you know he used to say Rassmuss Tonnessen really started the industry. And I said, but he never went fishing. He said, he had the chandlery and he would give us credit and without that credit, we could not have done what we needed to do. And that's how it was. They would help one another out. There was a sense of brotherhood, sisterhood, community. The larger family that I don't think exists today. And it can't in a corporate atmosphere. And there's fear, there's terrible fear that it's going to be gone, that the resource is going to be gone. This probably the only way to protect the resource. I don't know. I'm not close enough to it. I don't have enough facts to really have a valid opinion. But I don't see that sense of community that sense of pulling together and I remember when I was a kid and the MIDNIGHT SUN went down and they had a memorial service at the church because almost all of the guys were members of the church and they were all Norwegian and we all grieved as a community. And I think we feel that individually, you know if you've lived it. I think we feel that individually, but we don't feel it as a community anymore.

MHA I wonder if there's any difference in the different ethnic groups or peer groups.

CE Oh I'm sure it is. I remember the Seafood Producers Association at the end, because the Portuguese were such a force, but the Portuguese culture and the Norwegian culture are so opposite it's really, it's funny.

33:00

I mean they had these Norwegian men who barely spoke and would never have thought about excessive mannerisms or any sort of demonstration or hugging people or anything like that and then there's this culture that's very warm and very touchy and oh yeah the Portuguese and Norwegians will sit on the other side of the room and it was, it wasn't anyone's fault, it was just they couldn't have been more opposite and coming to some sort of understanding was really difficult in the beginning. I'm sure they all get along now to some degree. You know they, it was just really I remember that. It was so odd. I remember it was, especially when I was in high school like towards the end, you know in maybe later, towards the end of the Seafood Producers where it was just, you could walk into the Christmas party and it was like tension, you know which side do you belong on. Well you're blonde you go with the Norwegians, it was like stupid. It was silly and but that was going on everywhere. You know you have that kind of misunderstanding between people just because of the way you behave like Norwegians think it's bad luck to have a Christmas tree on the boat, the Portuguese think it's good luck. It's a superstition is what it is in either way.

MHA I remember at one point, and then we're gonna let you go, but I hope we can continue this conversation at another point even though I know you don't really understand

CE I know you want me to talk about Fish Mary

MHA Yes

Tech: Do you think we have time for you to say one more poem, the one about New Bedford?

CE Yeah whatever one you want, the one about New Bedford with the heartbeat.

Tech: the one that you referenced

CE The one that I referenced ok

Tech: Maybe just close out with that and we'll get a recording of that.

CE Yeah it opened right up to it wouldn't you know.

The heart of this city beats in the harbor
Its life blood flows through the great south channel in George's Bank
And then mingles with the sea

woops I'm sorry can I repeat that?

TEch: Yeah

CE:

The heart of this city beats in the harbor
Its life blood flows through the great South Channel on George's Banks
And mingles with the sea
Its soul passes through generations of men and women
Answering its call to a better life
Its dreams live in wheelhouses and processing plants
Chandleries and shipyards
Its pain is etched in the marble of the Seaman's Bethel
And tolled on Pier 3 once a year.
Its hope shines in the running lights
After a storm.

Tech: Thank you for reading that.

MHA Thank you so much Charlotte

CE Well you're welcome. Ok.

MHA I wish we had longer

CE Well if you want me to come back, I'll come back, just let me know.

MHA Ok

End of Tape 36:11